

Keeping in Touch

Sheila Keefe

With Mass attendance on the decline, what steps can be taken at the parish level to ensure that those who are distanced from the Church feel welcome and confident as they make the first steps to rejoining a parish community? Sheila Keefe, who has been working in ministries for non-churchgoing Catholics for 15 years, describes how the Church can reach out to those in need of encouragement.

It is estimated that at least two-thirds of the Catholic community in England and Wales are non-churchgoing Catholics, a fact that is causing increasing concern in dioceses and parishes today. KIT – Keeping in Touch – is a practical programme addressing this concern. KIT offers parishes step-by-step guidelines to reach out to, welcome and keep in touch with all local Catholics, whether or not they go to Church, through home visiting and small group meetings. I am a member of the Portsmouth diocesan KIT team that initiated the programme and have witnessed the growing success of the endeavour.

Hearing the stories

My first experience when I began this ministry was one of shock at some of the stories told by the people we visited. One man was told never to darken the doors of the church again when he confessed that he had had a vasectomy; another was told to find a new girlfriend when he introduced his non-Catholic fiancée to the parish priest. People who have lost their loved ones reveal how their church ‘friends’ kept away; others say they never felt they belonged to or had been welcomed in their parish. Feelings of guilt keep many Catholics away; they don’t believe God will ever forgive them for what they have done. This



applies especially in issues surrounding sex and marriage, although one lady in a very happy, 18-year-old second marriage told me, ‘We are told we are living in sin but it doesn’t feel like that’. Many simply drift away: when they marry a non-Catholic, for instance, and find a conflict of interest on Sunday mornings; or when they have been upset or angered by something said – by a priest, a religious or a member of their congregation; and abuse allega-

tions now in the headlines have turned unknown numbers away. There are many, many wounds out there that need to be healed; what is so surprising and humbling is the number of wounded people who are happy to talk and are open to reconciliation with the Church which had played such a large part in their lives.

An equally vivid experience for me, however, has been the joy felt as returners begin to relax in the warmth and friendship of the small group meetings that we hold, and even more as they receive the sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion – sometimes for the first time for many years. This joy is expressed in our logo, specially designed by two returners to express their delight at coming back to the Church. I will never forget how, some years ago, an adult altar server who had left the Church in anger after being deeply hurt, came back to Mass on Maundy Thursday

and was recognised by the MC. At the end of the service, the MC came over to him and invited him to carry the Cross at the Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday. The tears streamed down his face as he processed slowly up the aisle that day.

Meeting and sharing

The KIT small group meetings, inspired by the American group, [Landings](#), are especially valuable in helping us all to grow into our faith and into one another. The layout is quite informal, and we find that members quickly feel at home. We begin by tuning in to one another light-heartedly as we mark ourselves out of ten for the day or week we have had, and then tune in to God with a prayer, reading, picture or piece of music offered by one of the group. A key part of the meeting is the sharing of a faith story by one of the group. It could be the first time a storyteller has ever looked at or spoken about their faith in this way, and it is always useful to have the tissues at hand! In the last part of the meeting we explore an aspect of the Church's life or teaching. Recently my group was looking into the Trinity, asking the question, 'What do God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit mean to me?', and I was moved beyond words as returners spoke so personally of the closeness to God that they experience in their lives. It sometimes happens that non-churchgoing Catholics, without the support of the sacraments or the faith community, have personalised their faith in a way churchgoers often don't, and we can learn a lot from them.

The presence of God

Over and above the shock and the joy, however, is wonder at the mystery of God's presence among us, sometimes making himself known at the most unexpected moments. Just recently we welcomed home one returner who was 'found' through a telephone call to a wrong number, and another whose journey began with a casual conversation at a Christmas party. It does of course help if parishioners are aware of KIT and know where to direct those whom the Holy Spirit has touched in these apparent coincidences. In order for this to happen, one of the tasks facing the KIT team is to involve the whole parish in the programme, in praying (monthly bidding prayers, asking the housebound and parish sisters to pray, even inviting prayer sponsors to say the KIT prayer daily) and in

taking home information about KIT which they can pass on to anyone who may be interested.

When we make visits we always try to say a prayer as we approach the house we are visiting so that we are aware of God also ringing the door bell and being present within the conversation. We visit in twos and never go cold-calling; those we would like to visit receive a letter from the parish priest a week or two beforehand, giving them the opportunity to refuse a visit if they so wish. Our intention is not to convert; our aim is to get to know fellow Catholics and to address any concerns they may have. Through home visiting we have found new members for the choir and the youth club; we have introduced those living alone to parish lunches and CaFE (Catholic Faith Exploration) meetings, and arranged for visits from the SVP and Ministers of Communion for the elderly and housebound, who will often say, 'I didn't want to bother Father because he is such a busy person'. One elderly gentleman, who would only open the door a crack, said he didn't want a visit, but would like information about today's Church. A few months later we invited him to a small group meeting and were somewhat surprised when he accepted. He had been away from the Church for 40 years and it took him a good six months to find his voice in the group, but he persevered and joined us for the Triduum the following Easter. He could not believe his eyes when he saw altar girls, women readers, and lay people giving out Communion! He preferred weekday Masses, and could often be found quietly kneeling at the back of church, happy and at peace. He died two years later after receiving the Sacrament of the Sick.

An enriching and fulfilling ministry

One of the greatest challenges we face is finding volunteers to join a KIT team in the first place. Many people are reluctant to move out of their comfort zone and talk to strangers, and a lot of Catholics lack confidence in talking about their faith and are terrified they will not know the answers to questions. (In fact, most people we visit are not looking for answers; instead, they want a listening ear as they tell their stories.) Volunteers are more likely to come forward when invited by the parish priest. The system that has worked for us is to go through the parish records with the priest and secretary and identify around 20 people who might be willing and able to join us.

They are invited by the priest to an information evening to learn about KIT before committing themselves. In several parishes this has resulted in teams of ten or more members who are prepared to become involved and to train for the KIT ministry.

The most exciting of my KIT experiences have been working with the diocesan team. Together we have produced a manual which has just been printed in its fourth edition, honed and expanded as our experience has grown. With support and encouragement from the diocese we presented three area workshops in 2004 to make KIT better known. The evaluations we received from these were so positive that we dared to spread our wings further afield, and have since been invited to bring KIT to several different parts of the UK, from Preston and Leicester to Caerphilly and Catford, and even abroad to Brussels and Budapest as part of the Evangelisation Congresses held in those cities. KIT groups are now being born in several different parts of the country and we are slowly acquiring greater proficiency at power point presentations, public speaking, file management and even Skype!

But perhaps the deepest and most enduring experience I have is of meeting with, and sharing faith and life with, the most wonderful people of all ages and from all walks of life through this enriching and fulfilling ministry. All of us are on different stages of our faith journey, but working together helps each person as we move forward. The pain, the joys, the tears, the laughter are all part of that journey and I am enormously grateful to everyone involved for allowing me and all the KIT teams into their sacred space, to share a little of their unique insight into life and God and our Mother Church.

Sheila Keefe is the facilitator of the Portsmouth Diocesan KIT team.

To book a workshop, or for further information about KIT, please visit: www.kit4catholics.org.uk or email enquiries@kit4catholics.org.uk

To order the KIT manual or a CD (both £8) please email the above or contact Portsmouth diocese DPF, Park Place Pastoral Centre, Winchester Road, Wickham PO17 5HA Tel: 01329 835583.